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THE MASSACHUSETTS BAY CIRCUIT PROGRAM

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DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

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Cover photo: *Bridge over Mile Brook, Topsfield*

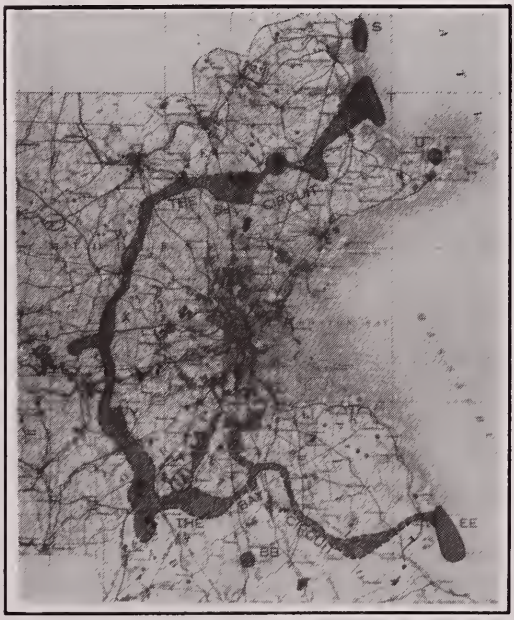
INTRODUCTION

The Bay Circuit is envisioned as a network of parks and open spaces that are connected by trails, waterways and scenic touring routes. When completed, the Bay Circuit will include examples of the natural, cultural and scenic features that constitute the typical New England landscape.

The Bay Circuit lies roughly between Routes 95 (128) and 495, in a semi-circle around metropolitan Boston. It covers a distance of approximately 100 miles through 50 cities and towns and is within easy reach of the 3 million citizens of metropolitan Boston.

The Bay Circuit Program is one of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management's land protection strategies. It focuses on protecting open space in some of the country's most rapidly-developing communities, those that are easily accessible to Boston.

A basic premise of the program is that residents of Boston, now and in the future, do not have to drive 2 or 3 hours in order to experience open countryside.



Section of map of proposed open spaces for Massachusetts, printed in 1929, showing the Bay Circuit.

History - In 1929, a special gubernatorial committee on the Needs and Uses of Open Spaces recommended the Bay Circuit as a way of ensuring that future residents of the growing Boston metropolitan area would always have easy access to the New England countryside.

The Bay Circuit

Central to the original scheme was the construction of a new parkway which would be used as a recreational touring route. This proposal was made before the construction of Route 128. This was also just prior to the stockmarket crash, and no funds were appropriated for implementation.

In 1956, Governor Christian Herter signed a law calling for the implementation of the Bay Circuit. The legislation recognized the passage of time in several ways. A broader area was given in which to create the Bay Circuit, since many of the original sites were assumed to have been developed. Also, by this time, Route 128 had been built and was used for commuting rather than recreation, so designation of existing roads for recreational driving was authorized rather than construction of a new highway.

But again, no funds were appropriated and no real progress was made in creating the greenbelt.

In 1984, in recognition of the effects of unprecedented growth and development in the communities surrounding Boston, $3,250,000 for the Bay Circuit was added to a landmark bond authorization for environmental projects. With this authorization, DEM finally had the ability to create the Bay Circuit.

Program Goal - The challenge facing DEM in 1984 was to adapt a 55-year-old concept to fit current land uses, trends and needs. Because so much development had taken place, even since the 1956 legislation, there was some doubt as to whether it was possible for the Bay Circuit to be a system of connected parks.

Park along Charles River, Natick.

Working with a newly-appointed advisory committee, the Governor's Committee on the Bay Circuit, DEM established the following statement of the Bay Circuit Concept and Objectives:

THE BAY CIRCUIT CONCEPT: A selection of scenic, historic, cultural and environmentally significant sites, both public and private; connected by designated roads, trails, waterways, stopping stations and paths of various kinds, highlighted by appropriate markers, signs and educational notations; created for the protection of our unique resources and the enjoyment of residents of the communities, the region and its visitors.

OBJECTIVE 1: To implement the Bay Circuit concept in the spirit of the 1929 Bay Circuit proposal as stated in Chapter 631 of the Acts of 1956: "... a system of privately and publicly-owned open spaces, including parks, forests, reservoirs and wildlife preserves, scenic and historic sites and other properties and reservations, surrounding Metropolitan Boston."

OBJECTIVE 2: To promote municipal and regional planning in Bay Circuit communities necessary to achieve the purpose of the Bay Circuit concept.

OBJECTIVE 3: To ensure that important scenic, historic, cultural, environmental and recreational resources are protected in a manner consistent with the purpose of the Bay Circuit concept.

OBJECTIVE 4: To ensure that appropriate public and private efforts are made to responsively maintain and manage the Bay Circuit resources and facilities.

OBJECTIVE 5: To ensure the enjoyment and use of the Bay Circuit, in keeping with the preservation of its cultural and environmental qualities.

Catching frogs, East Bridgewater.

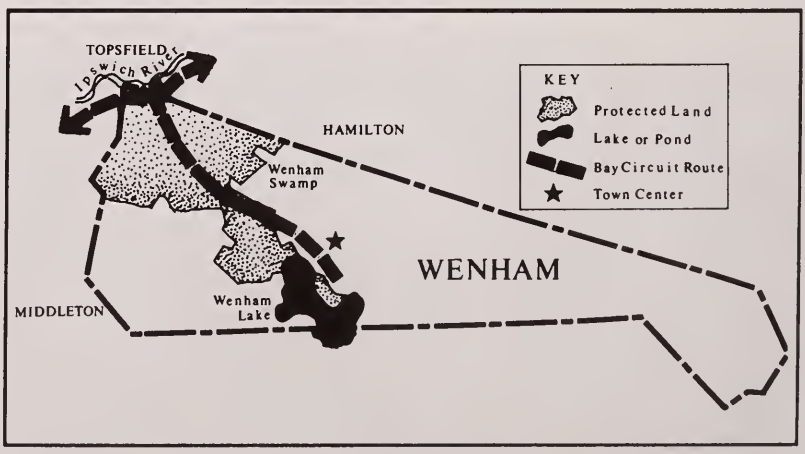
PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The Bay Circuit Program is based on the premise that home rule is sacred to New England communities, that local citizens have invaluable knowledge about land to be included in this greenway system, and that much of the land protection amd management will take place at the local level. DEM's role is to present the vision of the Bay Circuit and to provide regional coordination and assistance to the communities.

DEM has established regional committees, composed of 2 representatives from each community, in order to communicate the objectives of the Bay Circuit Program to the cities and towns and enlist their help. The Regional Committees have several roles:

- ❑ To provide DEM with information about current land uses.
- ❑ To define local environmental needs and opportunities.
- ❑ To identify best corridors that would:
  - meet local environmental needs,
  - take advantage of local opportunities, and
  - meet general Bay Circuit program goals.
- ❑ To enlist support of local boards in implementing the Bay Circuit.
- ❑ To develop a regional framework for municipal cooperation across town boundaries.

DEM began by mapping existing protected open space in these communities, although sources available were often incomplete or out-of-date, and for some towns, nonexistent. Copies of these maps were distributed to members of the Regional Committees, with the request that information be corrected and updated.



Diagrammatic representation of protected open space based on Bay Circuit inventory maps.

Eventually, DEM was able to map currently-protected open space. This open space has become the backbone of the Bay Circuit network.

Planning Grant Program - To enable communities to study their current land uses, plan for future open space and recreation needs, and identify potential Bay Circuit routes, DEM developed a program of planning grants. Less than $130,000 was available for these grants to communities. Grants of between $1800 and $9000 were awarded to 28 of the 50 Bay Circuit communities in 1986. Although matching funds from town budgets were not required, communities typically contributed significantly from local funds in order to complete their projects.

With this small funding, the cities and towns produced impressive planning studies. These studies ranged from town-wide open space plans with special focus on establishing a Bay Circuit route, to river corridor and water supply protection plans, to the development of regional trail systems.

For instance, eight towns developed open space plans for the first time, they had never before been able to take a comprehensive look at the natural, cultural and recreational resources and plan for their protection or development. Twelve other towns updated their open space plans with funding from the Bay Circuit Program. (An up-to-date open space plan makes a town eligible for partial reimbursement for conservation and recreation acquisitions under other federally and state-funded programs. Consequently, the development of these plans was given high priority by Bay Circuit staff).

Three other towns joined together to identify a trail that would connect the Merrimack River and the Ipswich River.

In most cases, significant amounts of volunteer time was used, not only enhancing the breadth of the document, but more importantly, ensuring local commitment to implementing the recommendations.

Acquisition - Over the years, much land has been protected in the Bay Circuit region by municipalities, state and federal agencies and private nonprofit land trusts. However, these acquisitions were not made with a grand scheme in mind, and more protection has taken place in some areas than in others. There are many areas where additional acquisitions are necessary to create Bay Circuit corridors.

Bay Circuit staff developed a set of criteria by which potential acquisitions are evaluated. These criteria, which include various environmental, cultural and scenic factors, put a high priority on **linkage**, the ability of a property to enhance the connectedness of the open space system, and on **joint projects**,

those for which a community finds other sources of funding to help protect the property. In other words, Bay Circuit uses its acquisition funds to encourage communities to explore as many funding sources as possible to protect land.

Several acquisitions have been completed, resulting in one major new State Park and 3 smaller regional parks which will be managed locally. The Bay Circuit Program contributed $2,200,000 toward these acquisitions which totalled over $10,370,000 in actual cost.

Historic cartpath leading to an upland pond on an 89-acre acquisition fronting on the Sudbury River in Sudbury.

Technical Assistance - Bay Circuit staff (three people for the first 2 1/2 years, 2 people at present) spend much of their time giving technical assistance to communities.

This technical assistance takes many forms and has many different results. Each of the 50 communities in the Bay Circuit is unique. Some have professional planners on staff, others have only volunteer boards of concerned citizens. Some communities were heavily developed 20 years ago, others are just beginning to feel the pressure.

Bay Circuit staff has responded accordingly. In the case of Billerica and Plympton, its role has been to help establish an open space agenda and the constituency to implement it. In the case of Duxbury, its role was to to add the Bay Circuit to their agenda and to encourage and support several projects that implement on-going open space initiatives. The Lowell to Sudbury Rail Trail is an example of the complex coordination required for regional projects involving several communities and agencies.

Building a Constituency - The Regional Committees were the first step in building a constituency for the Bay Circuit. The program provided a framework that they could use to achieve local conservation and recreation objectives. In turn, the program has grown through their involvement.

The aim of Bay Circuit staff is to have those Regional Committee members enlist others in their communities to help implement Bay Circuit strategies and to contact their Legislators when significant bills are being considered.

CURRENT STATUS

The original funding authorization of 1984, $3,250,000, is nearly exhausted. It has produced an impressive list of accomplishments:

- ❑ participation in five acquisition projects, protecting over 500 acres of open space;
- ❑ a sixth acquisition (242 acres on a major river), a complex project involving many agencies, is expected in FY '90;
- ❑ support of 28 planning grants, promoting open space protection at the local level;
- ❑ coordination of regional projects and promotion of regional activities;
- ❑ development of managment plans for various properties;
- ❑ assistance in developing material for presentation at several Town Meetings.

The Bay Circuit

1988 Bay Circuit Plans - The Bay Circuit staff recently completed a Bay Circuit Corridor Plan. This plan identifies conservation and recreation corridors within the designated cities and towns. The primary corridor is the "most direct" route from end to end. The secondary and tertiary routes are extra loops, or side trips off the primary corridor. These designations enable DEM staff to prioritize projects when time and funds are scarce.

A second plan, the Bay Circuit Land Protection Plan, classifies the land along these corridors as either already protected or as needing some form of protection.

At this point, the Bay Circuit has many different characteristics:

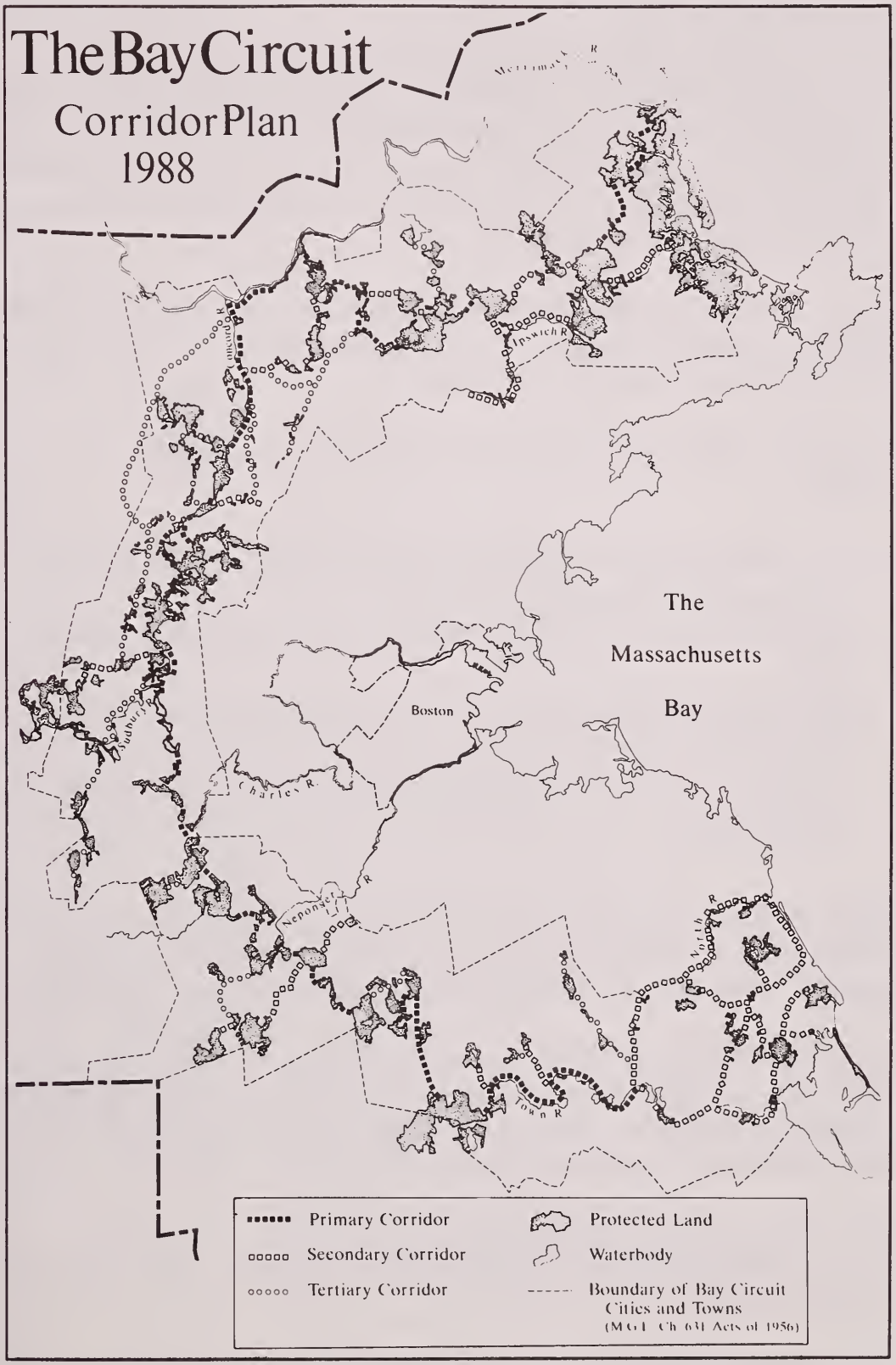
- ❑ Some of the corridors are land-based; others are river corridors;
- ❑ Some of this land is publicly accessible, some of it is not;
- ❑ Some of the land is publicly-owned, some owned by private land trusts;
- ❑ Some areas are well-protected; many are not.

Areas Needing Protection - The North Shore and MetroWest areas have a great deal of protected open space already. The potential Bay Circuit in the South Shore is much more theoretical, following unprotected river corridors most of the way. Most of these communities do not have professional planning or conservation staff to develop long-range open space plans or strategies for guiding growth. Bay Circuit staff is concentrating its efforts there to help implement strategies developed with Bay Circuit planning grants.

Identifying Scenic Touring Routes - The next task Bay Circuit staff is undertaking is to field check potential touring routes to identify scenic roads which can be used to travel from Duxbury to Newbury, allowing people to explore the Bay Circuit and experience the typical New England countryside while biking or driving for pleasure.

For example, a day's outing could include a stop at a historic North Easton Town Center, followed by a scenic drive to Moose Hill Wildlife Sanctuary to hike and explore. Or it could consist of a drive through Concord Town Center, with a stop at Walden Pond or the Great Meadows Wildlife Refuge.

Prtotection of touring routes will help to fulfill one of the original intents of the Bay Circuit, providing access to the New England countryside. Preservation includes helping communities protect roadsides to ensure that any new development is compatible with the desired landscape character.



Map showing currently-protected open space along the Bay Circuit. Dots and squares indicate areas where land protection or trail easements are needed.

PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

The Bay Circuit staff has its work is cut out for it. The corridors and the resources that need to be protected have now been identified. Dozens of local boards, citizen volunteers and professionals have joined the effort. But government bureaucracies, tenuous funding and archaic land use regulations are formidable obstacles. It is essential to be as creative and resourceful as possible to complete the Bay Circuit.

A new round of Regional Committee meetings is being planned to discuss the proposed recreation and conservation corridors, the scenic touring routes and ways of moving forward to protect them.

In addition to the ongoing work with communities, plans for the future include:

- ❑ developing "spokes" into Boston, perhaps connecting to the Boston Harbor Islands State Park;
- ❑ developing a series of destination points along public transportation lines;
- ❑ developing a public awareness campaign to encourage use of lesser-known Bay Circuit sites.
- ❑ using a Geographic Information System (computer-based mapping and information programs) to guide and assist the long-term establishment of the Bay Circuit.

Funding Needs - The Bay Circuit, although a state program, is not an Annual Budget account, but rather was funded in a bond authorization for capital projects. Additional funding must come through another bond authorization.

A 1987 bond authorization which funded many other environmental programs did not give additional funds to the Bay Circuit Program. DEM is continuing to make staff available to continue Bay Circuit planning and to work with the cities and towns to implement plans with other funds.

The studies completed with the original grant funds are an excellent beginning, and many of the corridors can indeed be created without the use of acquisition funds.

However, additional funding is imperative to the completion of the Bay Circuit, and DEM will continue to seek funding whenever possible.

CONCLUSION

It is tempting to wonder what the Bay Circuit **could** have been if implementation had begun in 1929. In that year, metropolitan Boston extended only as far as Watertown and Newton (about 9 miles from Boston Harbor).

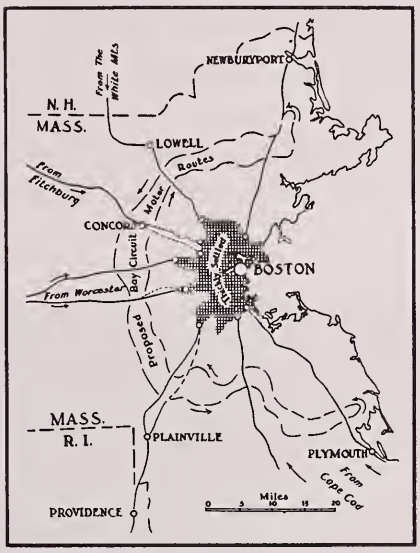
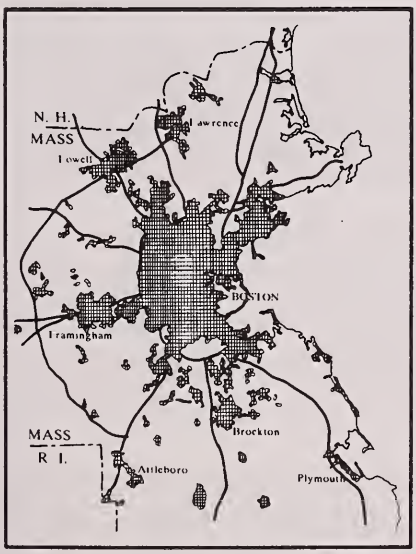


Illustration from early publication showing extent of area that was "thickly settled" in 1929.

By 1979, it extended out to Route 128 except for the Middlesex Fells and Blue Hills Reservations, with major development corridors stretching to Lowell, Framingham and Brockton.



Map showing extent of urban areas taken from most recent USGS maps (c. 1979).

Maps of urban areas for 1988 are not available, but urban development extends almost continuously to Framingham and Marlborough (approximately 30 miles from the Harbor).

The Bay Circuit

In 1929, the land in the area of the proposed Bay Circuit was not considered expensive, and acquisition was proposed to protect many areas. In 1988, it is some of the most expensive land in the country. The purchase of land can be used only as a last resort, and then in combination with other protection methods.

Because of the extraordinary scenery, many areas that were noted in the original plan have become homes of the wealthy. Others have become industrial parks because of proximity to highways. Some have even become the site of toxic contamination because wetlands were not understood and were frequently used as dumping grounds.

View from North Street, Wrentham.

The Bay Circuit Program is dedicated to ensuring that scenic vistas are preserved and made accessible to everyone by protecting and designating scenic roads, viewing areas, picnic sites, etc. The Bay Circuit is working with communities to determine areas that are too environmentally or culturally sensitive for certain land uses.

There is great need for every community to plan ahead to determine where its homes, industry and dumps should be located and where open fields, meadows and woodlands should be preserved. That planning **must** be part of an examination of the whole town and its attributes and needs; not on a fragmented, site-by-site basis when development plans are brought for approval.

One of the attractions of the Bay Circuit is that it will ultimately be an extraordinary greenway around one of the country's major cities. At the same time, the **process** of its creation will result in some desperately needed planning for growth and development.

The Bay Circuit concept had to be adapted somewhat in 1984 to make up for the drastic changes in land use that had occurred since it was first proposed. Nevertheless, it is still remarkably similar to the original plan.

However, unless land along the Bay Circuit corridors is protected soon, there will not be another opportunity to create a greenway for Boston.

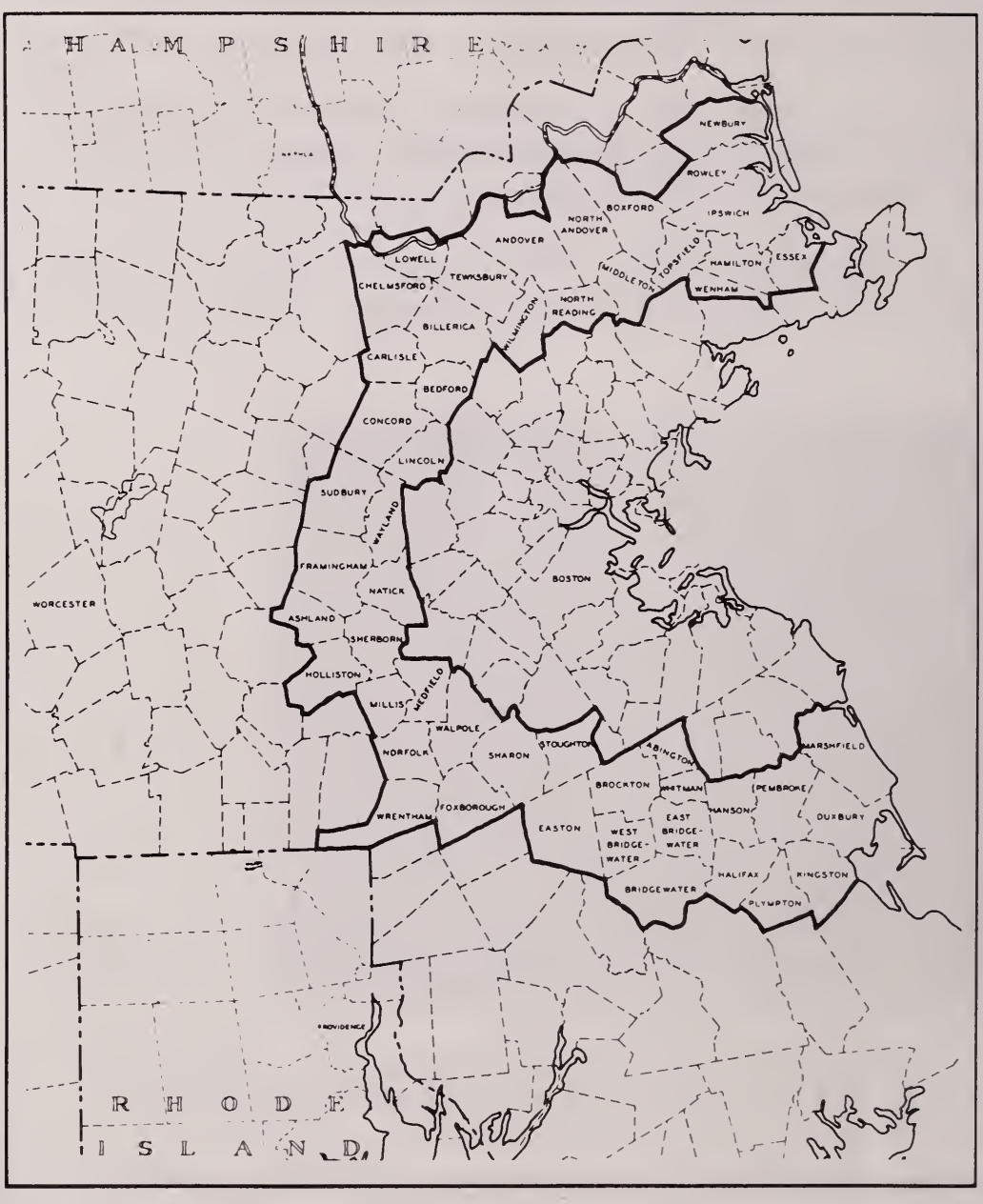
Jones River, Kingston.

The Bay Circuit goal is a vital one: to preserve open space, breathing space if you will, in close proximity to urban and densely-suburban development.

One of the chief criticisms of the northeastern United States is that it is too urban, that there is no place to get away from it all.

Those of us who love Massachusetts know that that is not yet true. The Bay Circuit offers an excellent way to make sure it never is.

Bay Circuit
Cities and Towns



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